

Research in Brief: Anxiety prevention programs in schools

Anxiety is one of the most common mental health problems of school aged children and adolescents. Programs to prevent anxiety have been designed to avoid the start of anxiety. Early intervention programs help children at risk of developing anxiety or help children with the beginning symptoms of anxiety.

School based prevention programs are generally aimed at all students, while early intervention programs are aimed at specifically identified students.

Are anxiety prevention and early intervention programs in schools effective?

A recent systematic review of 27 studies, of 20 different programs, found that most of these programs in schools were effective in reducing the symptoms of anxiety in children and adolescents.

Teacher's involvement in the program was more effective in reducing student anxiety. Teachers led one quarter (24%) of the programs but almost all (88%) of these teacher-led programs reported a reduction in the student's anxiety.

Programs aimed at adolescents were more effective than those delivered to children. Programs offered to all students were slightly more effective than those programs aimed at students at risk or students who had early symptoms of anxiety. No one program type was more effective than the others. The researchers suggested implementing a well evaluated program, such as FRIENDS.

What is a systematic review?

The purpose of a systematic review is to sum up the best available research on a specific question. This is done by bringing together the results of several studies. Studies included in a review are screened for quality, so that the findings of a large number of studies can be combined.



Why does this matter?

- ⇒ *Anxiety is one of the most common mental health problems of children and adolescents.*
- ⇒ *Anxiety leads to poor social and coping skills, reduced social interactions, low self esteem and lower academic achievements.*
- ⇒ *Teachers are effective at helping students reduce the symptoms of anxiety.*
- ⇒ *Schools are an effective environment to help students reduce the symptoms of anxiety.*
- ⇒ *There are effective programs that could be used by teachers and schools to help reduce the student's anxiety and improve school performance.*



Anxiety prevention programs in schools

What did they do?

The research team searched through the Cochrane Library, PsycInfo and PubMed databases for articles published between 1987 and February 2008.

The research team reviewed 5,725 studies to find the articles to answer the specific research question. They looked for studies that included all of the following: involved children (5-12 years) or adolescents (13-19 years); aimed to reduce or prevent the symptoms of anxiety or to build resilience; taught in a school; main result was to measure anxiety symptoms or diagnosis of anxiety; type of study was a randomized control trial; published in a peer reviewed journal; and in English.

The authors found 27 studies describing 20 individual anxiety prevention and early intervention programs in schools that met the criteria they established for inclusion.

The authors then calculated the effectiveness of each program and quality of the research used to evaluate each program.

What did they learn?

Overall, 21 of the 27 studies (78%) reported a significant improvement in the students' symptoms of anxiety.

Adolescents were the main target group (59%). A large number (81%) of the programs for adolescents reported significant reductions in anxiety symptoms. Only half (50%) of the programs for children reported lower anxiety levels.

Psychologists and counselors were the most common program leaders. Although teachers led only about one quarter (24%) of the programs, almost all of these programs (88%) reported a reduction in the students' anxiety.

Of all the programs taught, most of the programs (59%) were aimed at the general student population. This type of programs showed the most significant improvement (69%).

A smaller number of the programs were for students with mild or early symptoms (30%) or for student at risk (11%). Of the programs aimed at students with mild or early symptoms, half (50%) of the studies showed a significant improvement.

Of the programs aimed at students at risk, more than half (66%) of the studies showed a significant improvement.

Cognitive behaviour therapy was used most often (78%) as the instructional method. The majority (66%) of the programs lasted 8 to 10 sessions and about one quarter (28%) included parent sessions. When all the instructional strategies were reviewed, no one specific type of strategy was more effective than the others. Cognitive behaviour therapy was found to be only slightly more effective than other strategies such as psycho education, relaxation, and modeling.

The researchers suggested that programs should be developed by looking at programs that have proven effective, such as the FRIENDS program.

This brief summary was prepared from:

Alison L. Neil, Helen Christensen (2009) **Efficacy and Effectiveness of School-Based Prevention and Early Intervention Programs for Anxiety**, *Clinical Psychology Review* 29, 208-215

Please see the original document for full details. In the case of any disagreement between this summary and the original document, the original document should be seen as authoritative.

